

Christoph von Dohnányi interview – September 2007

I was still a kid when the war was over and consequently missed about five years of making music. We didn't deal with music so much then, we dealt with bombs. I finished school early at the age of sixteen in 1946, right after the war and had to decide my next move in life. I was in between and decided to study, and so I studied. I studied Law for two years before I realised I wanted to pursue a career in music, which I found to be very hard in the beginning.

It is pretty difficult to find the original intention of a Classical composer nearly 200 years later, and as a result, a lot of research is required into the times, reading and dealing with the art of these days. To obtain the most accurate scores in existence I went to the Musikverein in Vienna, where they have the first performance parts and so on. Here I revised Beethoven's corrections, which in a way, is very different. Once you have performed a piece of music many times, you should under no circumstances think you know it. I am very stubborn in going back, viewing the piece as if I had no knowledge of it. I apply this approach to every programme that I do, even if I have done a piece many times, it is not a matter of knowing the notes or the dynamics, it is the matter of what do I do with the piece, and what is the composer asking me to do?

The Conductor and the Artist are very important assets, but let's face it; in the days of Beethoven, Beethoven played his own compositions if he performed at a concert and did not perform a Mozart recital. Similarly, Mozart performed his own pieces. He knew Haydn and Bach, but the best days of music were the days when the composer performed his own music.

Once we were forced to go the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, and I would have loved to fundamentally conduct contemporary music, but perhaps it was sensible not to do this because at the same time you could lose your core audience, which is of course not too fond of the avant-garde.

It is a wonderful experience to communicate with young musicians and composers wherever you are. I like to conduct student orchestras and things like that, to find out how young people think. I believe this is important because to keep music alive, you have to deal with the young ones.

I have a certain sound in my head that I want the orchestra to achieve. They must accomplish this sound and I don't care how they do it, as long as it sounds right.